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The A Word: An Accommodationist strategy for US-China relations

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The A Word: An Accommodationist strategy for US-China relations

Micah Zenko

Executive Summary

- > To avoid talking itself into a conflict with China, the United States should pursue a more accommodating approach.
- > Too often worst-case fears are allowed to replace clear headed analysis of China's capabilities and strategies.
- > Establishing clear ideas about acceptable conduct in maritime, space and cyber domains should be the first priority to manage the relationship.

Policy Recommendations

- > **Maritime:** To prevent or mitigate a military confrontation at sea, the United States should be explicit about what it wants to know about China's maritime behavior, and present a clear and unambiguous understanding of expected actions in Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).
- > **Space:** The United States should work with Chinese military leaders to establish rules of the road for space and a bilateral communications channel between Joint Space Operations Command and its equivalent Chinese space agency. The US should also ask allied countries with stronger diplomatic ties to China to raise concerns about the country's potentially destabilising behaviors.
- > **Cyber:** Countries should engage in multilateral discussions that build upon the UN Disarmament and International Security Committee report; Crisis communication mechanisms and official points of contact should be developed among the region's cyber incidence response agencies and relevant cyber officials.

China's economic and military rise over the past two decades has unquestionably increased its influence in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The debate as to whether this will result in cooperation or military conflict between China and the United States and its regional allies has been the focus of countless studies, reports, and high-level discussions among political and military officials. Changes in the relative distribution of power between rising and declining great powers have historically been a condition that complicates the credibility of a declining power's commitments. Subsequently, a rising power may aggressively test those commitments of a strategic competitor by issuing an escalating series of threats and demands, which can—intentionally or unintentionally—culminate in the most consequential and deadly outcome in international relations: great power war.

Thoughtful Asia-Pacific government and military officials are deeply aware of this dynamic, but have not been forced to directly consider the implications until recently. This was primarily because China lacked the political will and conventional military, cyber, and space capabilities to challenge domains in which the United States and its allies had enjoyed a preeminent position. Not only has Chinese military spending increased by approximately 9 percent each year over the past decade¹, but China has employed its power-projection capabilities on behalf of an unprecedented range of missions. For example, Adm. Samuel Locklear, then-commander of US forces in the Pacific, acknowledged² in June 2013 that PLA Navy ships had begun operating within the United States' 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone. (Locklear refused to clarify exactly where.) In the Indian Ocean, submarines began docking at the Chinese-funded terminal in Colombo, Sri Lanka in September 2014 — the first of which was a diesel sub, followed by a nuclear-powered sub in November.³

What should the United States and its Asia-Pacific allies make of China's steady rise and expanded military reach? A fundamental driver for how they will respond is the manner in which they perceive China's motivations and behaviors. Threats and intentions are not objective reality, but rather socially-constructed and based upon the language and narratives that become dominant and accepted wisdom. Perceiving China through the lens of an adversary, and describing it as such, is a conscious choice, but one that could needlessly antagonise relations and reduce the degree of cooperation on a number of fronts. As Adm. Locklear aptly warned, 'We shouldn't talk ourselves into [a conflict].'

China and the United States will compete—as they have been—on many fronts, for market share, natural resources, diplomatic influence, and host-nation basing rights. Yet, two powers can be strategic competitors in a manner that is accommodating, meaning based on the most broadly agreed upon rules and norms for what is acceptable behavior. Alternatively, they can do so in a manner that is confrontational and even hostile, where rules and norms are opaque and fraught with misunderstandings. The United States and its Asia-Pacific allies should pursue an accommodationist approach, especially in the open seas, space, and cyberspace—the domains where there is the greatest possibility for consequential direct conflict. This accommodationist approach requires keeping in mind the following four factors.

First, China's growing military budgets and expanding reach have to be put into perspective. Like most rising powers throughout history, China seeks to have some ability to shape outcomes in its neighborhood through diplomacy, economic cooperation and—if necessary—by issuing threats and fighting and winning wars. Developing the military capabilities to achieve this is normal and should be expected. Yet, China's acquisition of military strength is often described as evidence of aggressive intentions. Capt. James Fanell, director of intelligence for the US Pacific Fleet, warned 'Make no mistake: the PRC navy is focused on war at sea, and sinking an opposing fleet.'⁴ This threatening portrayal is also what all modern, competent naval forces are trained and equipped to accomplish. Given the competing territorial claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea, and increased naval spending of most countries in the region, China's naval acquisitions are rational and even predictable.

Second, divining China's long-term strategic objectives is an inherently difficult experience and regional governments and militaries consistently demand that Beijing make its defense strategy more transparent. As US Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh recently admitted of his Chinese counterparts 'What their motives are, ambitions are, I wouldn't even pretend to guess those.'⁵ In the absence of such clarifying information it is easy to misperceive objectives and unnecessarily inflate threats. China's neighbors are correct to insist upon greater clarity, but they should not expect it for the simple reason that any country's leader prefers strategic ambiguity in their objectives to lessen the likelihood that other countries will balance against them. Moreover, it is possible and indeed likely that China's current leadership does not have a coherent, prioritised and adequately resourced set of foreign policy goals. Officials and policymakers in the United States, in particular, bemoan the lack of a grand strategy that can guide America's actions around the world. Yet, these same individuals often contend that China has such a grand strategy as well as the bureaucratic discipline to assure its implementation.

Third, when there is insufficient direct evidence of aggressive intent China is often described as being especially long-term and historical in its perspective. Whereas Western leaders are purportedly easily distracted and shift from crisis to crisis, China is characterised as 'playing the long game.' This perception is partially based in a widely repeated myth that in 1972 Zhou Enlai told Henry Kissinger that it was 'too soon to tell' regarding the French Revolution. We now know that Enlai was referring to the 1968 student riots in Paris, not the storming of the Bastille in 1789.⁶ Of course, China selectively applies and distorts its own historical record to defend its

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disputed sovereignty claims, including the so-call 'Nine-Dash Line'—but then so does everyone else. Moreover, recent Chinese presidents have made appeals to ancient history but then pursued foreign policy objectives that were some combination of shortsighted, pragmatic, and even self-defeating. These Chinese presidents may sincerely look back in time for inspiration, but cooperating and competing with China should be based upon its contemporary policies and not its imagined malicious intentions, based in deep history that are always just around the corner.



that they rarely come out into midfield and very, very rarely operate off the East or West Coast of the United States of America.¹⁹ When Chinese general officers use similar language, it is deemed aggressive and destabilising. It is, however, a rare honest articulation of what US defense strategy intends to achieve.

The entire basis for US naval and air presence in the Asia-Pacific is to assure its allies, gather intelligence and deter the likelihood of certain Chinese behaviours by maintain escalatory dominance over China's military.

Fourth, the United States and its allies believe that their own military behaviors are benign, stabilising, and transparent. China, meanwhile, is described as acting upon its 'spheres of influence, or coercion, or intimidation where big nations bully the small,' as President Obama put it in November while speaking at the University of Queensland.⁷ However, the entire basis for the US naval and air presence in the Asia-Pacific is to assure its allies, gather intelligence, and deter the likelihood of certain Chinese behaviors by maintaining escalatory dominance over China's military. The 'pivot' is usually promoted by diplomats not as a zero-sum game intended to contain China, but rather, as one senior Obama administration official more accurately described it in 2011: 'It is a very forward-deployed, assertive strategy that says we will not sit back and be punished. We will initiate.'¹⁸ Or, as submarine commander Rear Adm. Richard Breckenridge bragged in 2013: 'We operate forward inside [China's] 20-yard line, inside their red zone, so

As China continues to develop its defense capabilities, the United States and its Asia-Pacific allies should do everything practicable to promote a predictable and stable relationship with China that is based upon an adherence to an honest attempt to understand each other's reciprocity and transparency, and perspectives and interests. As this unfolds over the coming decades, this translates into four general assumptions that should guide Beijing and the United States and its allies. First, everyone will have to continue to learn to live with each other in open seas, international airspace, space, and cyber domains over the coming decades. Second, the iterative relationship that emerges within—as well as between—these domains is critical to preventing limited confrontations and direct military conflict. Third, relations will fluctuate between cooperation, disengagement and strong disagreement, but warfare between the contesting parties is not preordained. Recall that the United States and Soviet Union were enemies for over forty years, but avoided a major military conflict because both superpowers maintained military respect and detailed awareness of each other's operating procedures. Lastly, the likelihood of war can be reduced if all countries pursue their national interests in a manner consistent with internationally-accepted laws and norms.

With these factors in mind, there are more concrete policy steps that can be pursued to help develop common understandings for the open seas, international airspace, space, and cyber domains. The United States and its allies should recognise that they have limited leverage over China's foreign policy decisions. Nevertheless, they have options available to prevent or mitigate misperceptions, unintended escalations and worse, a great power war.

The open seas is the domain of the greatest near-term concern since military, domestic police, and commercial ships encounter each other constantly. While the United States and most other countries agree that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides states the right to regulate

economic activities within EEZs—generally considered to include waters extending up to 200 nautical miles from a nation’s coast—China interprets it differently. China claims that UNCLOS also gives states the right to regulate foreign military activities within their EEZs, rather than just their 12 nautical mile territorial waters. To prevent or mitigate a military confrontation at sea, the United States should be explicit about what it wants to know about China’s maritime behavior, and present a clear and unambiguous understanding of expected actions in the EEZs.

One successful recent outcome to build upon is the two memoranda of understanding signed in November 2014 between the United States and China regarding maritime and air encounters. It calls for notifications of actions at sea to ‘reduce misunderstanding, preventing miscalculation, and manage risk and crisis effectively’ and the establishment of a communication mechanism through which to exchange those notifications.

In space, China is pursuing troubling activities including unexplained co-orbital satellite maneuvers and ballistic missile defense tests that US officials contend could be used for antisatellite operations. (The reason they believe this is that many of China’s military space advances closely emulate those American and Soviet antisatellite capabilities from thirty years earlier.) In recent years, China has conducted a series of close proximity maneuvers with its satellites in lower earth orbit. While these could eventually be used for civilian purposes, some US officials believe that these experiments are primarily intended to demonstrate latent anti-satellite (ASAT) capabilities. Specifically, China launched three satellites in July 2013, which have reportedly conducted maneuvers toward other Chinese satellites and one of which is carrying a robotic arm that could be used for civilian or military purposes. The United States has requested and been denied any clarifying information about the intended purpose of these maneuvers through formal demarches and bilateral and multilateral space dialogues.

To prevent or mitigate military escalation between China and the United States and all space faring countries more broadly, more effort is needed to foster bilateral and multilateral civilian space cooperation. For the United States, this has been needlessly hindered by 2011 legislation that prevents Chinese officials and experts from visiting the National Aeronautics and Space Administration facility. The United States should work with Chinese military leaders to establish rules of the road for space and a bilateral communications channel between Joint Space Operations Command and its equivalent Chinese space agency. It should also ask allied countries with stronger diplomatic ties to China to raise concerns about the country’s potentially destabilising behaviors. Moreover, regional government officials should not be afraid to publicise growing concerns about China’s ASAT capabilities, mirroring what has been done to address Chinese threats to the maritime and cyber domains.

Finally, China (like many countries) stands accused for its efforts to break into government and private sector computer networks to spy and steal information. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper characterised the cyber threat from China in 2014 as a ‘sustained and growing campaign’—an ‘intolerable threat to our long-term national economic prosperity and security.’ As my Council on Foreign Relations colleague Adam Segal¹⁰ has pointed out, China and the United States have vastly distinct conceptions of what should be considered acceptable cyberspace behavior.¹¹ Americans say (off the record) that penetrating computer networks to ‘prepare the battlefield’ is fine, while doing the same thing to steal industrial secrets should be prohibited. It is highly unlikely that there would be a mutual understanding of what is acceptable espionage, but there are two steps that could reduce and mitigate the likelihood of destructive cyber conflict.

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First, countries could engage in multilateral discussions that build upon the UN Disarmament and International Security Committee report¹² that all Asia-Pacific countries endorsed in December 2013.¹³ In that report, experts agreed—including China for the first time—that international law applies to cyberspace, and committed to implement transparency and confidence-building measures, as well as continue discussions in successive years. Second, crisis communication mechanisms and official points of contact should be developed among the region's cyber incidence response agencies and relevant cyber officials. This can be modeled upon the US-Russia direct secure voice lines between the US Cybersecurity Coordinator and the Russian Deputy Secretary of the Security Council. Given that the United States and its regional allies have stated that mutual defense treaty obligations extend to cyber attacks, preventing cyber incidents from escalating should be a priority.

China is a rising power and its share of capabilities and influence are growing relative to the United States and other Asia-Pacific countries. Portraying China as a historically unique rising power and an enemy would be a tremendous strategic mistake. There may indeed be deep and irreparable differences between states in the region that someday result in a full scale military conflict. However, this is not preordained and it should be the goal of all Asia-Pacific governments to reduce the likelihood of this to the greatest extent possible.

Policy Recommendations

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Endnotes

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